

Big Hammock Hustle—Paddle Georgia 2012

June 18—Altamaha River

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation: 58 feet **Lat:** 31°53'7.02"N **Lon:** 82° 6'27.10"W

Ending Elevation: 43 feet **Lat:** 31°47'6.27"N **Lon:** 81°58'59.35"W

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Stanfield Landing
Mile 5	Big Hammock WMA
Mile 14	Upper Wayne County Landing

Points of Interest:

Mile 1.5—Ten Mile Creek—At river right here is the mouth of Ten Mile Creek, a tributary that drains much of Appling County. Its name reportedly comes from its distance from Ft. James, a frontier fort built in 1790 along the Altamaha downstream at Beard's Bluff.

Mile 1.5—Carters Bight Landing—This public boat launch features a covered picnic area, playground and public restrooms—another river amenity developed through the Altamaha River Partnership.

Mile 5—Lower Sister Bluff & Magnolia—Lower Sister Bluff is typical of the Altamaha's numerous bluffs, sporting the evergreen leaves and (in the spring and early summer) the showy, fragrant blooms of the Southern Magnolia—a tree native to the southern Coastal Plain from Virginia to Texas. The magnolia is one of the lasting symbols of the romanticized South and one that is closely associated with southern women (i.e. the movie *Steel Magnolias*). The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture opines that the trees have come to symbolize southerner's "unrealistic attitude toward life, of a people blinded by beauty." Viewing the blooms and catching their perfume as you drift beneath these bluffs, it's easy to see how Southerners have become enamored. Both Louisiana and Mississippi claim it as their state flower. In Mississippi, the decision was based on a vote by school children in 1900. The magnolia won the contest with 12,745 votes. In second place? The cotton blossom with just 4,171 votes. In defense of cotton, magnolias do not develop into spiny, prickly bolls from which cotton must be picked each fall.

Mile 5—Big Hammock Wildlife Management Area & Georgia Plumes—At river left here is a primitive boat ramp leading to this 6,177-acres WMA that stretches from the mouth of the Ohoopie for eight miles downstream along the north bank of the river. An 800-acre sand ridge forest within the WMA is registered as a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service because of rare plants and animals found there, including the Georgia plume (*Elliottia racemosa*). Georgia plume is a showy flowering shrub endemic to Georgia. Like the longleaf pines that once dominated South Georgia, plumes need wildfires to germinate their seeds. Thus, with the suppression of wildfires, populations have declined such that the plant is listed as threatened by Georgia. Botanists and land managers are currently experimenting with controlled burns to study their impacts on plume propagation. Other rare species found along the sand ridge are the gopher tortoise and eastern indigo snake. Dirt roads here parallel the river and lead further into the WMA.

Mile 7—Five Mile Creek Appling-Wayne County Line—Five Mile Creek marks the line between Appling and Wayne counties. Like Ten Mile Creek, its name is derived from its relative distance from Ft. James. At appropriate water levels, it is possible to venture up this narrow creek.

Mile 7.5—Altamaha Mussels—Step out on any Altamaha sandbar (like the one here) and you will likely find the shells of freshwater mussels. Explore a shallow backwater slough and you will likely spot mussel "tracks" in the mud and sand (they look as if someone has dragged a stick along the surface of the river bottom). Step carefully through these sloughs and you'll see the mussels, mostly buried in the river bottom, filtering water through their body, extracting nutrients from it and releasing cleaner water. They are the river's filters, and the Altamaha has them in abundance, including three species that are found nowhere else in the world (six are pictured below) Keep your eyes peeled and see how many you can find. From left to right... Altamaha Arcmussel, Altamaha Slabshell, Altamaha Lance, Georgia Elephant Ear, Altamaha Spiny mussel and the Altamaha Pocketbook



Altamaha Arcmussel—Rarely exceeding three inches in length, the arc mussel is a delicate shell and is most commonly found along gently sloping banks often associated with low hanging willow trees. It is on Georgia's "threatened" species list.

Altamaha Slabshell—Among the Altamaha's most common mussels, slabshells live up to their name. They are heavy, black, thick-shelled mussels, shaped something like a rectangle.

Altamaha Lance—Appropriately named and easy to identify. No other Altamaha mussel has an elongated, thin, black shell.

Georgia Elephant Ear—Not near as common as the slabshell or pocketbook, but it can be found throughout the Altamaha. Its shape resembles that of an elephant ear—but it's black, not gray in color.

Altamaha Spiny mussel—A federally endangered species, the spiny mussel sports quarter-inch to one-inch spines on its shell. The shell is generally 2-3 inches in length. These mussels are extremely rare, but are most commonly found buried in sandbars with a swift current or in sloughs formed between the river bank and an exposed sandbar.

Altamaha Pocketbook—Next to the slabshell, this is the Altamaha's most common endemic mussel. It is thick-shelled and round and occasionally is streaked with dark bands across its yellow-to-brown shell.

Mile 9—Willows—On river left here is an example of a dense stand of black willow, a predominant tree along Georgia's coastal plain rivers. It is not surprising then that the scientific genus name for willows, *Salix*, is derived from two Celtic words, *sal* and *lis*, which mean "near water." It is easy to identify by its lance-shaped, pale green leaves, and (during the summer) by its billowy white seeds which land in the water and often form huge drifts on the water's surface. This is one of the plant's survival techniques: wet seeds remain viable much longer than dry ones. At one time, willow was the preferred wood for artificial limbs because it is lightweight and does not splinter easily. Today, it is often employed in streambank restoration projects because it germinates readily from cuttings, grows rapidly and helps prevent soil erosion. Ancient pharmacopoeia recognized the bark and leaves of willow as useful in the treatment of rheumatism. In 1829, the natural glucoside *salicin* was isolated from willow. Today it is the basic ingredient of aspirin, although salicylic acid is synthesized rather than extracted from willows.

Mile 11—Limb Line Fishing—Approaching Upper Wayne County Landing (and all of the river's landings) you may encounter fishing lines hanging from riverside trees and snags. Please be mindful of these lines; the ends of them hold fish hooks and can be dangerous to passing boaters, not to mention wildlife. Limb line fishing is particularly popular along the Altamaha where anglers bait them hoping to land one of the river's massive catfish. Such lines are permitted, but state law requires that anglers mark the lines with their names and addresses, check them at least every 24 hours and remove them after their fishing trip. Of course, these rules are seldom followed. It is not uncommon for water birds to become entangled in the lines. In 2009, a limb line was identified as the cause of a bald eagle death on the Chattahoochee. There are rumors of high tech anglers using GPS units to mark the whereabouts of their limb lines, but along the Altamaha the preferred "GPS" still appears to be beer cans or plastic soda bottles.